[Scotch-Irish Derrick Man]

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SCOTCH-IRISH DERRICKMAN

The sky beyond sheer granite walls and jagged mountains of grout was painted in lurid colors by the sinking sun. A twilight stillness was on the wooded heights. A hundred feet below lay the abandoned Barclay Quarry, now partly filled with dark water. Derrick masts and booms stood interlaced with guywires. Half-buried in the ground were coils of cable and giant hooks of rusted iron. A long boiler rested in the brush. Birds called from the outer slopes, and from the watery [chasm?] below echoed the deep chunk of a bullfrog. There was a lonely grandeur, a grim beauty in the scene. There was something fearsome and awesome about it, as you remembered the strong man who had labored and died there, cutting this great gorge through a mountain of solid granite.

“I worked this quarry twenty-one years,” Jack Gillis said, looking down at the abandoned quarry. He was Scotch-Irish, long of limb and wide of shoulder, over sixty years old now. His thin face was red and graven with hard lines, his narrow blue eyes crinkled when he smiled, his lean jaws had an arrogant thrust.

“I was head-derrickman. See that shack an the other side- I operated from there awhile. I worked all through here. It was one of the biggest quarries on the Hill and there's still a lot of good stone left in it. All kinds of good stone. Back there by the first waterhole, [that's?]

where they got what they called Sunnyside Blue, the only blue granite on the Hill. It was a beautiful blue, and the hardest granite of all. It wouldn't take a polish, 2 didn't need a polish. The carvers liked to work on that blue stone — they said they could put an edge like a razor on it. Softer stone sometimes crumbles when they try to get a fine edge. But the carvers could get razor-fine edges on that blue. And see that little hole this side of the big quarry, sunk there in the woods. Well the best dark granite in the world came out of that hole. There's lots of it left, too, both the dark and the blue. They'd still be working it if Langley hadn't sold off all the machinery and equipment.

“Must be eight-ten years since they worked it. Yes, it's too bad, too bad. I haven't worked since December myself. Six months out of work. Got to do something, by God, before long.

“Way up by that last waterhole, see the hand-derrick? I started opening a quarry there three-four months ago. It was too much like work though, all by hand. If you had a compressor it would be different. But it's goddamn slow by hand. Quarrying is slow enough with machinery.

“See that red shack over across? I was running the derrick one day when my signal man fell off from there. It's a hundred feet anyway to where the water is now, and that water is way over a hundred feet deep, maybe two hundred, Jesus Christs when he landed! You could hear it on top. I heard it a long time after, too. There wasn't much left of that boy... He was always kinda careless. When we had visitors he'd take chances just to show off. Just a kid, that's why. He took one too many, the poor devil. I'm glad I wasn't on the bottom near where he landed.

“I used to handle the dynamite too. The worst one I ever saw was when they were blasting out under a ledge. The fuse was lit all right but it took a long time to go off. They thought it had gone dead or something I told them not to go back under there but this fellow did, this French fellow. 3 It went off just as he was crawling under. Jesus help me, I never want

to see anything like that again! Blew him out like a cannonball. Blew the hair right off his head, the clothes off his body. Blew his eyes out, his ears off, there were pieces of wood and stone blown right into his head and body. I don't understand it but that man lived for two hours or more. He lived screaming and cursing, blown skinless right into hell, but still alive. He kept screaming: I'll get you! “You dirty bastards! I'll get you all, you sonsabitches!” And then it would be just one long awful screech, so your hair would prickle up, your stomach turn over, your heart sink. I don't know why such a thing should happen to any man, by Jesus, I don't. But it happened to that poor devil, I saw it — and heard it. I get sick now thinking of it.

“This quarry was ruined after Langley took it over. He started selling off a piece of land here, a piece there. Then he got a junk man in and sold the machinery to him, stripped off everything on the place. He had a new steam shovel that came from the World's Fair in Chicago. They took that. They came in with blow-torches, cut everything down and apart, carried it away. He sold all those thousands of dollars worth of machinery for eight hundred dollars! I don't know why he did it unless he got funny in the head as he got older, By Jesus, it was a crime! If the machinery had been left some other company would have been in here long before this. Sure, sure, they'd be working it today. Now it lays dead and idle, all that good granite.

I've been here in the quarries thirty years but I wish I'd never seen them. The quarries are no good now. If you get laid off one job you can't get on another. They just keep the same crew, hardly ever taking on a new man. 4 “I never stayed in one place very long until I came here. I wouldn't have stayed, but it was here I met my wife. She's a Swedish woman, she made me settle down. Probably I needed somebody like her, something solid and steady to tie to. I used to drink too much, I was pretty wild and crazy. I worked my way across the continent twice from coast to coast. I saw plenty, but I'd be going yet if I hadn't met Ollie...

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“I still get restless once in awhile... Thirty years I've been here, since 1909. I haven't got much to show for it except a little farm on the Hill. I own that, but we're not living an it now. I can make a little more by renting it to a fellow and living in a flat in the village. Ollie and I don't need too much room. But it's damn nice up on the farm, way up on the hilltop with maples growing in the yard and the mountains all around in the distance. We have springwater up there too. It's a good place to live all right, but there's not much money in farming for the work you put into it, and IUm not the worker I was.

“I was born up in New Brunswick. I was sixteen when I left home and started across the continent. I worked in the copper mines, moving west from one to another. I rode second class on the trains. They had no cushions on the seats, just wooden benches like in a park. I gathered up all the paper I could find for a cushion. At night you'd crawl up on the baggage rack, put your coat under your head, and sleep — or try to sleep. All night the gravel from the prairies out there was like hail on the roof. They'd stop in some town, fifteen minutes for lunch. By Jesus you'd no more have your food on the counter then the bell would start ringing and they'd yell, “All aboard.” Some of 'em were fools enough to leave their food there and run for the train, but not me. I took mine with me, plates and all. No goddamn railroad was going to make me starve. 5 “That reminds me of a story. These two tramps were walking along the road and they couldn't get a thing to eat nowhere. They were damn near dead of starvation. Every house they stopped at they'd sic the dogs on them. Well, they came to some horse manure in the road, and one of them bent down and picked up a curdle of it. “B'God I got an idea,” he said. At the next place he told his friend to wait. He rapped on the door and a lady came. “Lady, I haven't eaten for two weeks. I'm starving to death. Will you give me some salt to put on this?” She says, “Throw that dirty thing away, come in, wash your hands, and I'll give you a real feed.” And she did. The fellow went back and told his friend it worked fine, so the next farmhouse they came to his friend tried it. A big Scotch woman came to the door. “Lady, I'm dying for lack of food. Would you give me some salt to put on this?” She looked at his open hand. “Throw that

dirty thing away," the Scotch woman says. "Go out to the barn and get a fresh piece. I'll go get the salt.

Jack Gillis threw his head back and laughed. "I'm part Scotch myself," he said and laughed again. There was an Irish brogue in his voice, mingled with a trace of Scottish [burr?]. The combination was as pleasant as his smile.

"When I was a kid," he went on, "we used to play hooky from school and go down to the docks to listen to the sailors. Some of the stories I heard I can still remember. Some days we'd go aboard, climb way up in the topsails, make a mammock of the canvas and lay there all day. All we had to watch out for was they didn't start unreefing the sail. I could sit for hours listening to those sailors talk. Maybe that's where I got my roving feet.

"If you want a real experience, go to one of them harvesting excursions. I went on one and by God I never saw such times. Three-four thousand men on that train. They'd stop ten miles outside of town, unhook the engine, and caboose, and go in to get water. They didn't dare bring us into town. All 6 All those men, they'd turn a town bottom side up in no time, you know.

They did stop in a little place near Calgary. There was a saloon right across from the station. You should've seen those fellows pile off that train and into that saloon. They filled it solid-full. The ones outside were yelling to get in. They came out of there with quart bottles piled in their arms like cord wood. An old woman upstairs over the saloon started throwing dishes and pots at them. She'd watch for a head to come out and let go a dish at it. She must've thrown everything she had in the place. There was a firehose there. A fellow came down the street all dressed up with nose glasses, a half-derby, long coat, spats, and all. They turned the hose onto him and it knocked him keeling end ever end. The train stopped by a cattleyard full of sheep. They started loading sheep onto that train. When the train started they [bagan?] heaving sheep out one after another. One place we stopped by a haymow. They filled the car with straw and lay around in it, just like hogs.

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“We went to work in a little place north of Winnipeg. The weather was bad and there was no harvesting. Fourteen of us were in a bunch and a farmer came in and hired us. He wanted us to stay in town and live at the hotel but we wouldn't. He had to take us out to the farm. We lived in what they call a caboose, a car on wheels with bunks inside, so it could be moved to follow the harvesting. It rained for two weeks. That farmer got goddamn sick of feeding us for doing nothing. All day we lay around the bunk house. At night we'd go into town, get drunk, come back, and keep that farmer awake all night. There was plenty of music, harmonicas, guitars, banjos... That farmer was goddamn good and sick of us, but we did plenty of hard work after it stopped raining.

“Then I was out in Vancouver. Funny place out there on the coast, where I was. Worked up in the mountains in a copper mine. You either had to hike 7 up the mountain or ride up in the buckets. They had his cable rigged up on big spindles, top and bottom, so the full buckets pulled the empty ones back up the mountain. We used to ride up in buckets. Some places you'd go over canyons hundreds of feet deep, and overhead were the mountains, all rock and snow against the sky, looking big as the whole world, as if any minute they'd come down on you. After these mountains I didn't [mind?] the quarries here much. Well, I started there and I ended up here.

“Then I was motorman on a street car in Boston. One time a fellow left the whole payroll for the [Hold?] Rubber Company in my car. I tell you I did some tall thinking when I saw all that money. At the end of the run at Harvard Square I told the conductor. We got off with the bag and sat down an a bench. We did a lot of thinking there, by God. He said we ought to get out with the money. He was an honest man too, it was just the temptation... I felt the same way. But finally I turned it in. Just as I did the guy came after it, his face white as a ghost's. The funny part was he didn't know my number. the car number, or what time he'd got on the car! We could've got away with it easy. Well, he gave me five dollars out of his pocket. He was just trying to earn a day's pay like us.

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“After that I came up here and I've been here ever since. A fellow told me about Barre granite, steady jobs and good pay. I was sick of subways. I wanted to get out in the open again. So here I am. Twenty-one years of my life in that quarry hole. Nine more years in others just like it. Now I'm out of work and I don't know what to do.

“By the looks of the papers tonight we'll be having war before long. They been sharpening up their teeth a long time over there. They'll be at it pretty soon... They're still holding that blockade. The price of food has jumped over fifty per cent already. Something's got to break, it sure 8 has.

“I did about everything in the quarries — everything but run a channelling machine. I never did that. All the other jobs I know. But what good's that to me now?

“What I'd like, by God, is a little business of my own. You know, a grocery store or something, maybe a gasoline station. I've thought of putting a grocery store on wheels, running it around from house to house. But I don't know. I only know I've got to do something. We're going to have a short summer this year. After the Fourth of July you have to begin thinking about winter in this country. I'm not worrying too much. I always got by all right, probably I always will. But things are different now than they used to be. Once I could always go out and earn forty-fifty dollars a week. Can't do that any more, by Jesus, not the way things are today.

“I don't care about making a lot of money, I just want to get by. We haven't any children. Sometimes we're lonesome, and then again, by God, I'M glad I didn't bring any into this world. I wouldn't have missed living my life with all the bad spots in it; but I had a better chance than kids do now... If you start across the continent today you got to ride freight trains or bum the highway, you can't jump from job to job.”